

## LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



# Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ

4021 S. State St.

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**Preliminary Landmark recommendation approved by the  
Commission on Chicago Landmarks, November 3, 2005**



**CITY OF CHICAGO  
Richard M. Daley, Mayor**

**Department of Planning and Development  
Lori T. Healey, Commissioner**

*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.*

*The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.*

*This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.*

# **Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ Building**

**4021 South State Street**

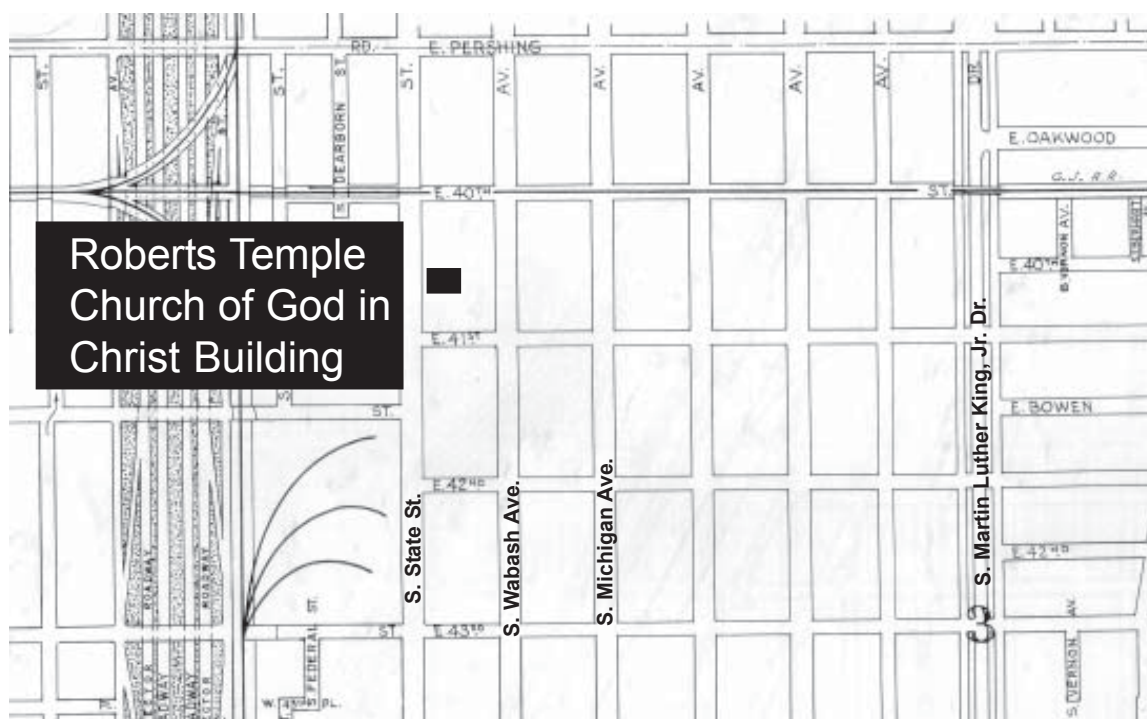
**Built:** 1922 (original one-story building)  
1927 (second-floor addition)  
1992-93 (exterior and interior remodeling)

**Architect:** Edward G. McClellan (1922)

One of the seminal movements in the United States during the twentieth century was the civil-rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. An important event in drawing attention to the plight of African-Americans, and one that galvanized many to its cause was the murder of Emmett Till, a black teenage boy from Chicago who was lynched in August 1955 while visiting relatives in Mississippi.

The decision by Mamie Till Bradley, Emmett's mother, to insist on an open-casket funeral at the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ on Chicago's South Side allowed mourners to see the condition of her son's body, which appalled and angered the thousands who waited in long lines to pay their respects over four days of funeral and visitation at the church building between September 3 - 6, 1955. Coverage in the African-American press, including *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender*, of Emmett Till's murder, his funeral—including a visually shocking and renowned photograph of Emmett's battered body published in *Jet*—and the trial of his accused murderers viscerally brought the oppression of African-Americans to millions of Americans.

Coupled with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the United States Supreme Court the year before and the subsequent refusal by Rosa Parks to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955, the murder and funeral of Emmett Till was one of the significant early catalysts for the civil-rights movement leading to the Civil-Rights Act of 1964.



**Top:** The lynching and subsequent funeral of Chicago teenager Emmett Till (seen here with his mother Mamie Till Bradley) was one of the catalytic events of the civil-rights movement in the 1950s.

**Bottom:** The Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ Building, the location of the funeral, is located at 4021 S. State St. in Chicago's South Side Grand Boulevard community area.

## THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN AMERICA UP TO 1955

The modern civil-rights movement—for which the lynching of Emmett Till was such a galvanizing event—was a response to several centuries of political and social oppression of African-Americans. As part of a widespread practice during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, men and women of African birth were sold into slavery and transported to the Western Hemisphere. In the English colonies that became the United States of America, Africans were slaves in a variety of situations, most commonly as farm hands on plantations and farms in southern colonies such as Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia.

The debate over the abolition of slavery began as early as the debate over the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the writing of the United States Constitution in 1789, as disagreements over slavery already divided Americans. Throughout the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the institution of slavery and its spread into newly established territories and states was an important source of controversy, leading eventually to the Civil War. Although other issues were also involved in the war, slavery was arguably the most significant underlying cause, and its abolition as a result of the war is considered by many to be the war's most important outcome.

The years of Reconstruction after the Civil War lasted until 1877 and saw an effort to incorporate freed slaves into American society through economic and political reforms enforced by direct federal control over the former Confederate states. However, this seminal effort was thwarted by both Southern opposition and eventual Northern political lack of interest. The election of Rutherford Hayes in 1876 was made possible through the support of white Southerners. In response, federal troops were withdrawn from the South, and the federal government turned a blind eye to the Southern states' increasing oppression of African-Americans.

The remaining years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a rise of both state and local laws in the South suppressing African-American progress. Dubbed “Jim Crow” laws, these laws made it difficult, if not impossible, for blacks to vote or hold public office in the South. In addition, blacks living in rural areas especially were left without independent means of livelihood, working as farm laborers or sharecroppers, usually in long-term debt to farm owners or town stores.

These political and economic restrictions were combined with social constraints of segregation. First through common practice, then codified through law, blacks and whites were kept apart through separate public facilities. Blacks went to separate schools and churches, drank from separate drinking fountains and used separate restrooms. Public facilities that both blacks and whites used, such as theaters and railroad stations, were divided into “white only” and “colored only” sections. Many private facilities with public functions, such as hotels and restaurants, were forbidden to blacks.

More insidiously, blacks were taught to understand “their place” as second-class citizens through fear and intimidation. African-Americans in the South, especially in rural areas

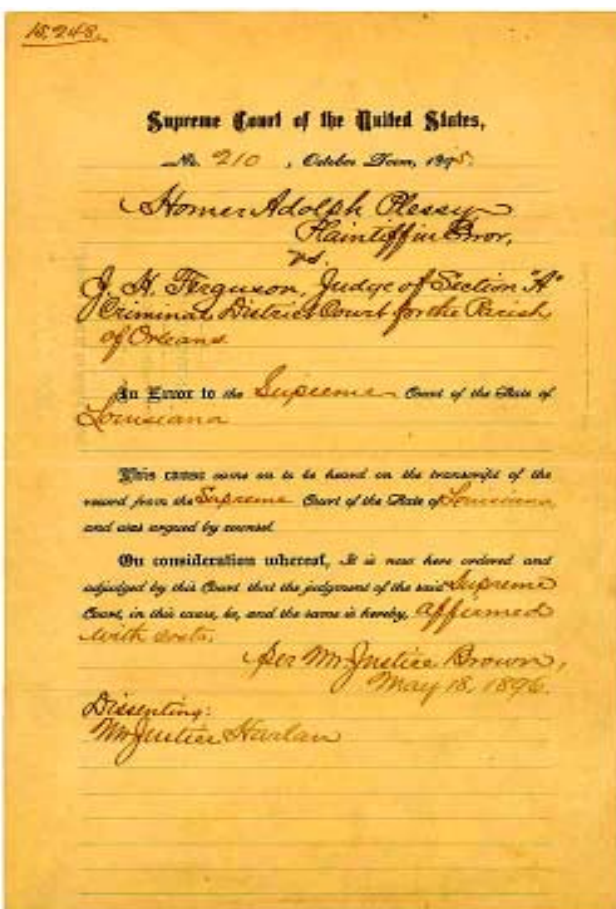
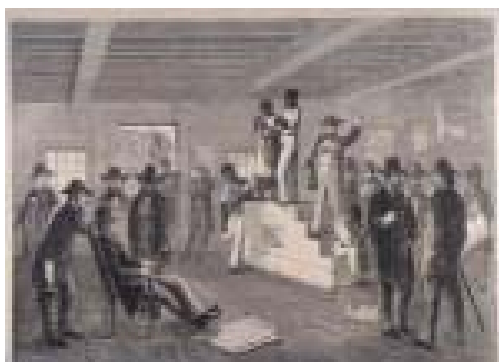


and small towns, “learned” to defer to whites in ways large and small. Those who attempted to vote or to assert their political rights often lost their jobs or were physically intimidated by secret organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Black men especially had to be careful in their interactions with white women; any sense that there were interactions between the two, casual or otherwise, often led to African-American men suffering beatings at best, and lynchings at worse.

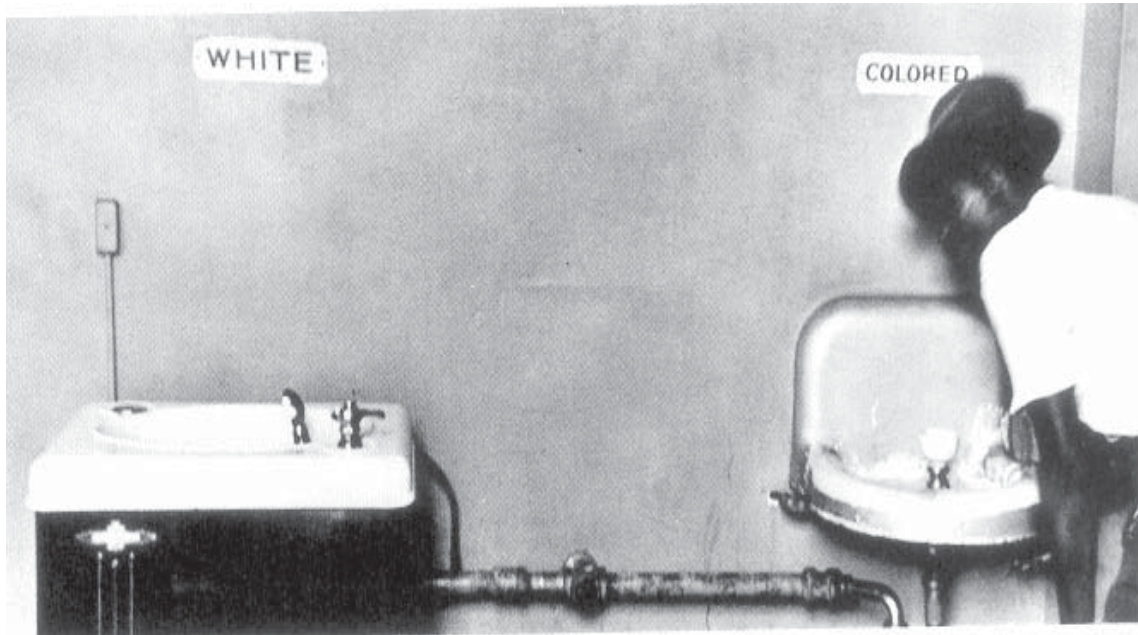
Over time, the oppression faced by African-Americans in the South encouraged many to leave their homes, families, and friends to seek their fortunes and futures elsewhere. Especially in the years between World War I and II, tens of thousands of African-Americans left the rural South for better opportunities in the North. This “Great Migration” brought about a transformation of African-American culture in the United States as there arose two distinct African-American cultures—one Southern, rural, poor, and forced to be more subservient, the second Northern, more prosperous and more socially free and more inclined to push for cultural reforms and rights. Northern blacks also suffered from racism, including segregated public facilities such as theaters and hotels, restrictive covenants on housing, restrictions in employment, and physical intimidation and lynchings. However, the relative economic prosperity and social freedom enjoyed by African-Americans in Northern cities was enticing for many.

In Chicago, this influx of Southern blacks brought about a transformation of the City’s South Side as several neighborhoods became predominantly African-American. These neighborhoods formed the core of what became popularly known as “Bronzeville” or the “Black Belt.” Although prejudice forced African-Americans to live in these more restricted neighborhoods, the ability to own businesses, go to school, and live more relatively freely was a revelation to blacks used to “Jim Crow” restrictions in the South. By the 1950s, an entire generation of African-Americans unused to Southern restrictions and prejudices had come of age in Chicago and other Northern cities, and that generation had conceived another generation of children, among these Emmett Till.

Efforts early on to get rid of segregation and bring about equal rights for African-Americans saw limited success. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that “separate but equal” public facilities for blacks and whites were constitutional. In 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded to fight for full citizenship for African-Americans. Especially in the post-World War II era, after the war effort had encouraged the mixing of races and brought about the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948, the NAACP saw possibilities for the advancement of African-American civil rights through a series of court cases. The most successful of these was *Brown v. Board of Education*, brought before the Supreme Court in 1954. That year the Court, overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson*, found unanimously that the concept of “separate but equal” as applied to public schools was unconstitutional. This ruling, and an accompanying integration implementation order issued the following year, called for the integration of public education throughout the United States “with all deliberate speed.” This brought about a tremendous sense of anger and uncertainty among many whites, particularly in the South and many vowed to fight for the status quo, both political and social.



The oppression of African-Americans is one of the most significant issues in United States history. Top left: A slave auction in Richmond, Virginia, in 1861. Africans and their descendents were kept and sold as slaves until the Civil War ended this practice. Top right: Before emancipation came during the Civil War, Southern slaves often sought their freedom by running away. Rewards for their return, as indicated in this flyer, were common. Bottom left: After emancipation, African-Americans, especially those in the South, were forced to accept segregated public facilities. A United States Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, declared constitutional the idea of "separate but equal" facilities. Bottom right: African-American men accused of crimes were often lynched; a view of a lynching published in in *Life* magazine in 1930.



**Top:** The abolition of segregated public facilities was an important goal of the civil-rights movement.

**Bottom:** The United States Supreme Court in its 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declared segregated public schools to be unconstitutional.



## EMMETT TILL

Emmett Louis Till was born on July 25, 1941, to Mamie and Louis Till. His mother had been born in Mississippi, but was brought to the Chicago area in January 1922 when she was two. Her father, Wiley Nash Carthan, had gotten a job with the Corn Products Refining Company factory in the near southwest suburb of Argo (part of Summit, Illinois), and had then brought the rest of his family north.

The Carthan family's move from Mississippi to Chicago was a familiar story for African-Americans during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Repressed politically by Jim Crow laws and often without means of economic advancement where they lived, Southern blacks were drawn to Northern cities by the promise of greater economic and social freedom. Starting as a relative trickle in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the "Great Migration" north to Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, New York and other cities intensified during World War I, when Northern factories needed more labor to handle wartime demands, and continued through the 1920s. These families typically settled near friends and family who had previously moved to the North. Argo was one focus of black migration because of the giant Corn Products factory, one of the largest of its kind in the world, which was a source of employment for blacks and whites alike.

Mamie graduated from Argo Community High School with honors in 1940. She then married Louis Till, who served in the United States Army during the course of World War II. Emmett and his mother first lived with Mamie's mother Alma for several years, then on their own. In 1953, the two moved into an apartment in a brick two-flat at 6427 S. St. Lawrence (still standing) in Chicago's South-Side Woodlawn neighborhood. Mrs. Bradley, as she was known at the time after a second brief marriage, worked for the United States Air Force as a civilian procurement officer.

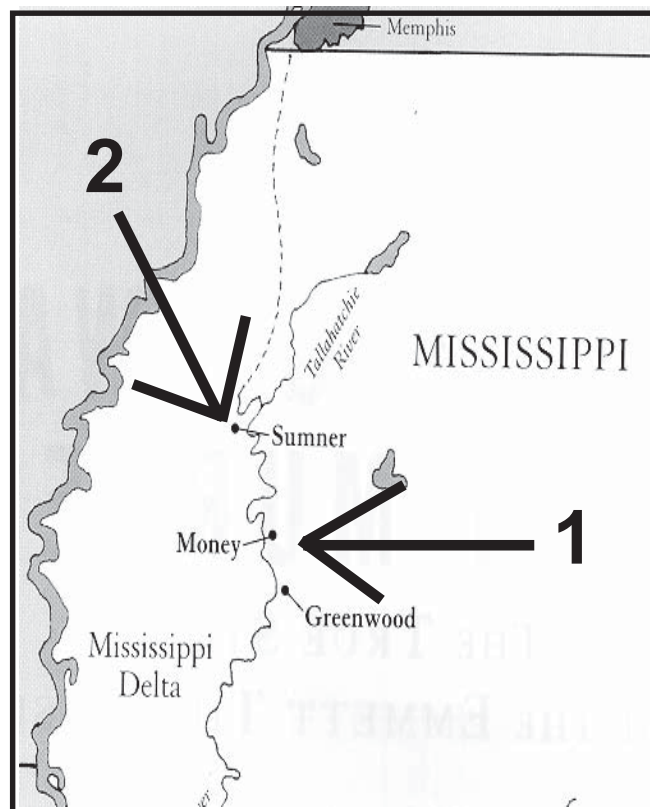
In the summer of 1955, Mamie Bradley planned a vacation for herself and Emmett to visit relatives in Nebraska. At the last minute, however, plans changed. Her uncle, Mose Wright, visiting Chicago from Mississippi for a family funeral, invited Emmett and his cousin Curtis Jones to go back to Mississippi for a brief visit. Despite Mrs. Bradley's concerns about Southern racism, she allowed Emmett to go, putting him on a train at a railroad station at 63rd St. and Wallace Ave. in the Englewood neighborhood.

Emmett, his cousins Curtis Jones and Wheeler Parker, and his great-uncle Mose traveled south on the *City of New Orleans* train, traditionally an important transportation connection between Chicago and the South. At first the visit with his great-uncle's family, who lived near the small town of Webb, Mississippi, went well. Emmett found life in rural Mississippi to be much different than Chicago, but enjoyable as a carefree fourteen-year-old boy.

On August 24, 1955, Emmett and several of his cousins visited the small general store in nearby Money owned by Roy Bryant and patronized by local African-Americans. Bryant, who was white, was out of town on business, and the store was being run that day by his young wife, Carolyn. Accounts of what happened during Emmett's visit to the store



Emmett Till was a 14-year-old from Chicago when he traveled south in August 1955 to visit relatives near Money, Mississippi. Top left and right: Photographs of Emmett. Right: A map of northwestern Mississippi, commonly known as "the Delta." Money, the town where Emmett stayed with his great-uncle Mose Wright, is marked "1." Sumner, the county seat where Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam were tried for Emmett Till's murder, is labeled "2."





**Top left: The Bryant general store in Money, which Emmett and his cousins visited on August 24, 1955. Top right: Carolyn Bryant, the wife of Roy Bryant, the owner of the general store, who was managing the store that day. Bottom: The house of Emmett's great-uncle Mose Wright and the location of Emmett's middle-of-the-night abduction by Bryant and Milam.**



differ. Some eyewitnesses have stated that Emmett had whistled at Mrs. Bryant, although Mrs. Bradley always doubted that Emmett, a shy boy and someone who often stuttered, would have done so. Regardless of what actually transpired, the story got around to Bryant, upon his return home, that Emmett had been fresh to his wife.

Traditional social mores in rural Mississippi, reinforced by Jim Crow laws, enforced a strong sense of deference towards whites on the part of blacks, and any transgression of them, especially one between a black man or boy and a white woman or girl, was considered especially severe by whites. Outraged, Bryant talked with his older half-brother, J. W. Milam, and the two on the morning of August 28 about 2:30 a.m. drove out in the middle of the night to Emmett's great-uncle's house. There, they threatened Mose Wright with bodily harm if he didn't hand Emmett over to them.

Bryant and Milam took Emmett away. Based on statements by the two abductors given to *Look* magazine in 1956 after their acquittals for both murder and kidnapping, along with later accounts by local residents, Emmett was taken to a barn at the nearby Sheridan's Plantation, severely beaten, and then shot through the head. His body was then tied to a heavy cotton gin wheel and thrown into the nearby Tallahatchie River. It would be on August 31, after the report of his abduction and the arrest of Bryant and Milam, that his body would be found by a teenage boy fishing on the river.

## **THE ROBERTS TEMPLE CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST BUILDING AND THE FUNERAL OF EMMETT TILL**

Mississippi authorities originally planned to bury Emmett locally, but his mother, Mamie Till Bradley, insisted that his body be brought home to Chicago for burial. A local African-American funeral director, A. A. Rayner, Jr., agreed to handle the arrangements. Emmett's body was brought by train to the Illinois Central Railroad station (demolished) at 12<sup>th</sup> Street (now Roosevelt Road) and transported to the A. A. Rayner, Jr. & Sons Funeral Home at 4141 S. Cottage Grove Ave. (demolished). There, despite the wishes of Mississippi authorities, Mrs. Bradley insisted that the coffin be opened and that she be allowed to view her son's body. After examining his body and assuring herself that it was indeed him, Mrs. Bradley requested an open-casket funeral, stating, "Let the world see what I see."

The subsequent one-day visitation at the Rayner Funeral Home on Friday, September 2, 1955, brought, by Mrs. Bradley's later estimate, over 5,000 mourners (although accounts vary widely). Emmett's abduction and the subsequent discovery of his body and its transport to Chicago had drawn wide Chicago newspaper coverage, led by the *Chicago Defender*, Chicago's premier African-American-owned newspaper and a leading African-American newspaper in the United States. Many Chicagoans were outraged by the murder of this young boy and wished to pay their respects.





Emmett Till's body was shipped by rail to the Illinois Central Railroad station at 12th St. (now Roosevelt Rd.; the station has been demolished). Top: Mamie Bradley, Emmett's mother, is supported upon seeing Emmett's casket by (left to right) by Rev. Isaiah Roberts, Gene Mobley (who would become Mrs. Bradley's husband), and Bishop Louis H. Ford. (Rev. Roberts, the pastor of Roberts Temple, would preside over Emmett's funeral, while Bishop Ford would give the eulogy.)

Famous but shocking photographs published in (bottom left) the *Chicago Defender* and (bottom right) the nationally-distributed *Jet* magazine publicized the brutal nature of Emmett Till's death.

Carl Hirsch, writing in the September 10, 1955, issue of the *Daily Worker*, stated:

The almost inexpressible indignation of the people over the Mississippi lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Louis Till has overflowed Chicago like a tidal wave. In the Negro community of the South Side, a mass outpouring of endless thousands flowed into the area where the body was on display, and funeral services were held.

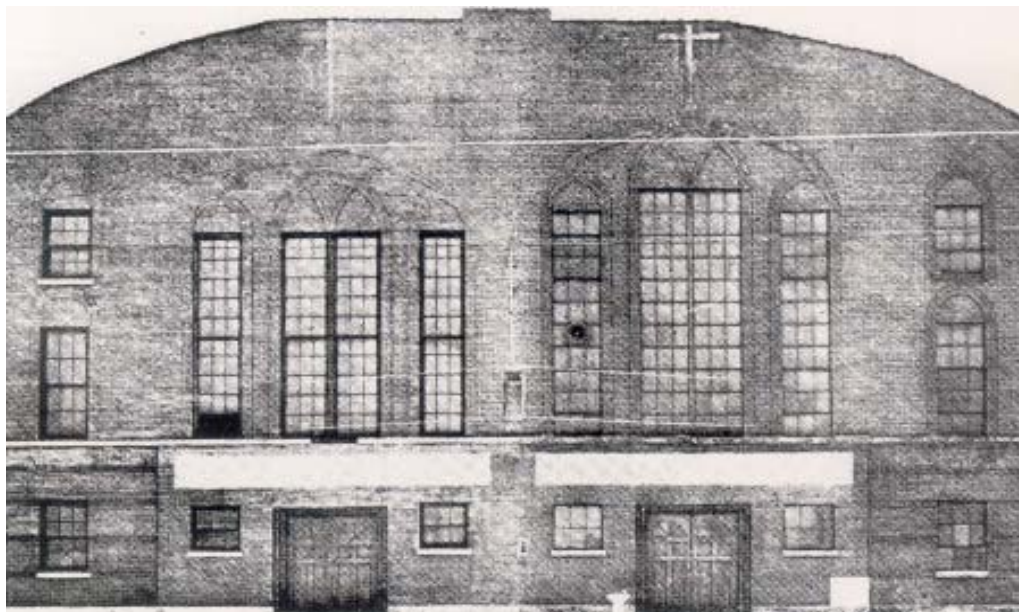
Over 50,000 persons came on Friday night to view the pitifully mutilated body of the youngster laid out in the funeral chapel at 4141 Cottage Grove. They poured four abreast through the chapel, until 2 a.m. when the doors were finally closed. Strong young men were weeping openly without shame; some were shaken with uncontrollable cries of grief; others fainted as they saw the mute evidence of the unspeakable barbarity of the white supremacist lynchers.

Mrs. Bradley requested that the funeral be held at Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ at 4021 S. State St. Roberts Temple was the first Church of God in Christ church established in Chicago and is considered the “Mother Church” in Northern Illinois for this denomination. It was established in 1916 by Elder William Roberts and occupied existing buildings at 3033 S. State St., 31<sup>st</sup> and LaSalle, and 37<sup>th</sup> and Federal before starting the construction of its own building at the present location in 1922.

This original building, designed by architect Edward G. McClellan, was a simply-ornamented, one-story, red-brick building. McClellan was a South-Side architect, with an office at 7441 S. Cottage Grove Ave., and other documented buildings include houses in the Jackson Park Highlands Chicago Landmark District and in the Beverly and Morgan Park neighborhoods.

Within a few years, by 1927, the building was greatly expanded to include a large second-floor church sanctuary. The resulting building had a red-brick front façade with tall, narrow windows lighting the sanctuary that were ornamented by slightly-raised pointed-arch brickwork. (City of Chicago building permit records for the original 1922 building called for a “2-story brick church.” Church owners in Chicago often built buildings that were designed from the beginning to be built in stages, and it is possible that the 1927 appearance of the church building was intended from the beginning.) In 1953 the church was named Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ in honor of its founder. In 1992, the building was refronted with tan brick, covering the earlier dark brick that remains behind, and the sanctuary was remodeled.

Emmett Till’s funeral and internment was scheduled for Saturday, September 3, 1955, but when Mrs. Bradley arrived at the church, a capacity crowd of at least 2,000 people had crammed into the church building, and, by some estimates, as many as 5,000 were outside, unable to enter. Rev. Isaiah Roberts, the pastor of Roberts Temple, presided over the funeral, while Bishop Louis H. Ford of the St. Paul Church of God in Christ gave the eulogy. Illinois State Senator Marshall Korshak, representing Governor William Stratten, called Emmett “a young martyr in a fight for democracy and freedom, in a fight against evil men.” The Reverend Cornelius Adams urged mourners to contribute money to fund



Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ, the location of Emmett Till's extended visitation and funeral, is the "Mother Church" for the denomination in Northern Illinois. Top left: Bishop William Roberts, the founder of Roberts Temple. Top right: Rev. Isaiah Roberts, who presided over the Emmett Till funeral. Middle: A panoramic photograph of the Roberts Temple congregation in 1927; the church building had yet to be enlarged to include its large upper-floor sanctuary and its wider building footprint. Bottom: The Roberts Temple building after the addition of the upper-floor sanctuary; with the addition of signage, this is largely the appearance of the building in 1955 at the time of the Till funeral.





**Views of the crowds gathered outside the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ during the funeral and visitation for Emmett Till. Accounts vary widely, but as many as 100,000 people may have gathered at the church building to view Emmett's body during the four days that it was at the church.**





**Top: A view of Emmett Till's casket and mourners in the Roberts Temple sanctuary.**

**Bottom: Mamie Bradley grieving before her son's coffin, decorated with flowers and photographs.**



The open-casket visitation at Roberts Temple lasted from Saturday, September 3, until the morning of Tuesday, September 6, 1955. Estimates of the number of mourners vary widely; perhaps as many as 100,000 viewed his mutilated body.





**Above: Emmett Till's casket leaving the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ building.**



**Left: Emmett Till was buried in Burr Oak Cemetery in suburban Alsip on Tuesday, September 6, 1955.**

political organizing against segregation. The Rev. Archibald Carey, an African Methodist Episcopal minister, a former Chicago alderman and a former alternate delegate to the United Nations, spoke out for calm and non-violence, as did Bishop Ford.

The large number of people that had already seen Emmett's body at the funeral home and at the church, plus the large number that had not been able to enter the church building, convinced Mrs. Bradley that his burial should be delayed to allow more time for mourners to view the body. During the next three days before the burial in Burr Oak Cemetery in suburban Alsip on Tuesday, September 6, thousands of people viewed the body. Accounts differ on the total number of mourners; Mrs. Bradley's memoir mentions one report of more than 25,000 people viewing Emmett's body on Saturday, and as many as 100,000 people filing past his coffin during the days before the funeral on Tuesday.

The press extensively covered the funeral and extended visitation, and television cameras captured the profound effect that viewing Emmett's badly-battered body had on viewers, leaving both men and women shaking, crying, and fainting. Emmett's body had been terribly mutilated, with a swollen face, protruding tongue, missing eye, and gunshot and axe wounds to his head from the beating and shooting, all exacerbated by physical decay from the three days it lay in the Tallahatchie River during the heat of a Mississippi summer. Mrs. Bradley and others later spoke of the dreadful smell that was present despite displaying Emmett's body behind a glass shield.

In addition, the September 15, 1955, issue of *Jet* magazine, a national African-American news magazine published by Chicago businessman John H. Johnson, published a picture of Emmett's battered body in its coffin that shocked thousands of people around the country. It has been noted repeatedly by journalists and historians, and in oral histories of the civil-rights movement, that the image of Emmett Till's body in *Jet* was an important catalyst for African-Americans wanting political and social change.

## **THE IMPACT OF THE DEATH OF EMMETT TILL ON THE UNITED STATES CIVIL-RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

Soon after the funeral, Mrs. Bradley traveled to Mississippi to attend the murder trial of Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, who had been charged with Emmett's murder. The jury trial, held in Sumner, Mississippi, a larger town near Money and the county seat of Tallahatchie County, began on September 19, 1955, and ended four days later with Bryant and Milam's acquittal, despite the testimony of Mose Wright, who testified, despite death threats, that Emmett had last been seen with Bryant and Milam as they had taken him by force from Wright's house; and the testimony of Mrs. Bradley, who testified that the body found in the Tallahatchie River was indeed her son's, despite defense assertions that there was insufficient proof. (A later grand jury hearing found that there was not enough evidence to indict Bryant and Milam of the lesser charge of kidnapping.)





**Left: J. W. Milam (left) and Roy Bryant (right), the accused murderers of Emmett Till, entering the Tallahatchie County Courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi.**

**Bottom: A view of the murder trial while in recess.**





Top left: A ring, originally worn by Emmett Till's father Louis and found on Emmett's body after his murder. Top right: The cotton gin wheel tied to Emmett's body before it was dumped into the Tallahatchie River. Middle: A courtroom drawing made by Chicago artist Franklin McMahon, working for *Life* magazine, of the moment when Emmett's great-uncle, Mose Wright, bravely identified Bryant and Milam as the men who had abducted Emmett the night of his death. Right: Mrs. Bradley being interviewed by newsreporters while attending the trial. It was noted by the national press that Mrs. Bradley displayed tremendous dignity and eloquence throughout the extended ordeal of Emmett's death and funeral, and the trial of his accused murderers.



Outrage at the acquittals of Bryant and Milam was widespread among African-Americans throughout the country. Rallies were held in late September 1955 in several cities protesting the outcome and urging action to promote equal civil rights for blacks. In an October 1, 1955, article entitled, "100,000 Across Nation Protest Till Lynching," the *New York Times* reported on mass meetings occurring in several Northern cities, including at the Williams Institutional CME Church in New York (where Mrs. Bradley herself spoke); the Metropolitan Community Church at 4100 S. King Dr. in Chicago (extant); the Sharp Street Methodist Church in Baltimore; and in Detroit. Donations to the NAACP, seen by many as the national organization best positioned to effect civil-rights change, increased greatly during this period. Other civil-rights organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were strengthened by new support.

It has been noted by historians that the outrage felt in the aftermath of the Emmett Till murder helped to galvanize African-Americans to the fight for civil-rights reforms. It was especially important for individuals who heard of it as a news story through *Jet* magazine and newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Mrs. Bradley's decision to have an open-casket funeral for her son, and to delay burial in order to allow as many people as possible to see his body, was crucial in building this outrage. Juan Williams, in his book, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*, noted that the display of Emmett's body by his mother "without question . . . moved black America in a way the Supreme Court ruling on school desegregation could not match."

Simeon Booker, the Washington bureau chief for *Jet* magazine, noted years later that Emmett's death "decisively jolted 'the sleeping giant of black people.'" People were startled, scared, and appalled that such a death could happen in America in 1955, and many were energized towards activism. Historian Timuel Black remembers the effect that the lynching had on his students, many of whom had been born in Mississippi and still had family there, at Roosevelt High School in Gary, Indiana. Scholar Clenora Hudson-Weems, in her book *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement*, quotes many individual memories and reactions, including, for example, that of Howard University sociology professor Joyce A. Ladner:

I remember crying over it, and the tremendous fear. I think that it was one of the greatest influences that ultimately led me to becoming a scholar, a sociologist. It was impossible for me to become a dispassionate observer . . . A very important thing is that it followed the Supreme Court decision in 1954. It's like the whites said that they don't care what rights we were given . . . It served as a grave incident that showed people how intractable a problem could be and how difficult a solution would be. So when the spark came in Mississippi to sit in the public library, for example, people who participated had been incensed by the Till incident and were just waiting for the spark to come. The Till incident was the catalyst.

The murder of Emmett Till had a profound effect on Rosa Parks, a seamstress from Montgomery, Alabama, who was heartsick at his death. Her biographer, Douglas Brinkley, wrote that she cried when she saw the *Jet* magazine photograph of his body and that "the sight of it made her physically ill." Within three months, on December 1, 1955, her decision not to give up her seat on a municipal bus brought about a boycott of the Montgomery bus system, spearheaded by a young minister, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.





The death of Emmett Till was an important catalyst for individuals seeking social and political justice and equality for African-Americans, and remains so to this day. Top left: Mrs. Bradley visited the U. S. Capitol in October 1955 in an unsuccessful attempt to meet with the Senate Subcommittee on Civil Rights. Top right: Press coverage such as that of the *Chicago Defender* was instrumental in raising awareness. Middle left: A labor rally in New York dedicated to racial equality held soon after Emmett's death. Middle right: According to her biographer, Douglas Brinkley, Rosa Parks was heartsick at Emmett Till's death. Three months later she refused to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her arrest and the subsequent boycott of the Montgomery bus system was a seminal event in the civil-rights movement. Right: The reinternment of Emmett Till's body in 2005 after DNA testing confirmed its identity.



The publication of Bryant and Milam's paid murder confessions in *Look* magazine in January, 1956, only strengthened the resolve of African-Americans and sympathetic whites to fight for civil rights. On August 28, 1963, eight years after Emmett Till was kidnapped and murdered, Dr. King gave his now-famous "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. The next year, the Civil-Rights Act of 1964 was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Emmett Till has been honored in many ways since his death in 1955. A large number of poems, stories, television shows, and plays have been based, either strictly or loosely, on his murder. Soon after Emmett's death, noted poet Langston Hughes wrote *Mississippi—1955*. Illinois poet laureate Gwendolyn Brooks wrote two poems: *A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi*; *Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon* and *The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till*. Folk singer Bob Dylan wrote *The Death of Emmett Till* in 1963. Three Rod Serling-written episodes for the noteworthy television omnibus series *Playhouse 90* were based on aspects of Emmett's murder. Plays include ones by James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and David Barr (working with Mrs. Bradley), as well as a novel, *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, by Chris Crowe. In addition, on July 25, 1991, a portion of 71<sup>st</sup> Street on Chicago's South Side was renamed in honor of Emmett Till.

Mamie Bradley entered college in 1956, where she earned a degree in education before becoming a Chicago school teacher. In 1957 she married Gene Mobley, and as Mrs. Mamie Till Mobley, she continued to work for civil rights in Emmett's memory. She also continued to seek justice for her son's lynching and to ensure that he would not be forgotten. Mrs. Mobley worked with scholars, journalists and documentary filmmakers such as Clenora Hudson-Weems, Christopher Benson, and more recently Keith Beauchamp, among others, until her death in early 2003. Recently, the Chicago Park District has named a small park at E. 64th St. and S. Ellis Ave. in the Woodlawn neighborhood in honor of Mrs. Till-Mobley.

Due to these efforts by Mrs. Mobley and others, including Keith Beauchamp, whose "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till" documentary raised new questions about the lynching and its aftermath, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) decided in 2004 to reopen its investigation into the lynching. In May 2005 Emmett Till's body was exhumed, and DNA testing confirmed its identity. Information implicating individuals in addition to Bryant and Milam with direct involvement in Emmett's lynching is being investigated as of October 2005.

## **CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION**

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sect 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, object or district if the Commission

determines it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for designation,” as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ Building be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

### ***Criterion 1: Critical Part of the City’s History***

*Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

- The Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ Building is the location of the funeral and extended visitation for Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black Chicago teenager lynched in 1955 while visiting relatives in Mississippi, and is the surviving Chicago building that best exemplifies the national importance of Emmett Till and the tragic event of his death to the history of the civil rights movement in the United States.
- The death and funeral of Emmett Till in late August and early September 1955 is one of the three major catalytic events in the nationally-important civil-rights movement in 1954 and 1955, the others being the U.S. Supreme Court decision of Brown v. Board of Education in May 1954 and Rosa Park’s refusal to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama, in December 1955.

### ***Criterion 2: Significant Historic Event***

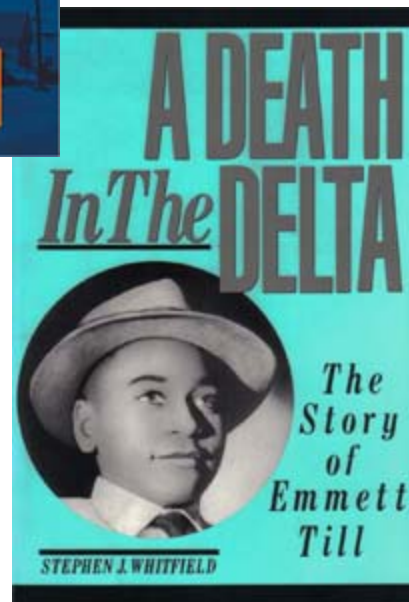
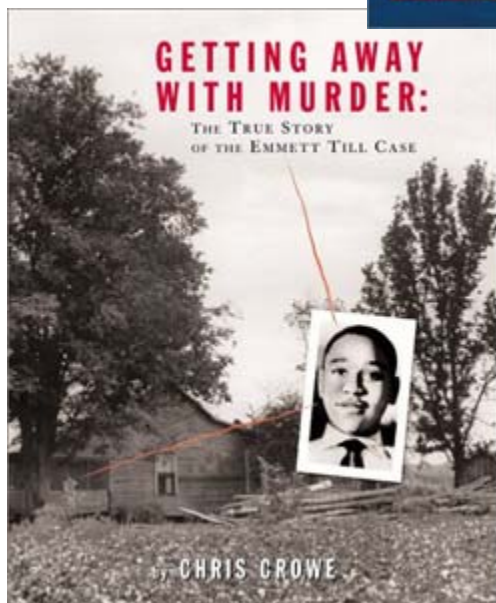
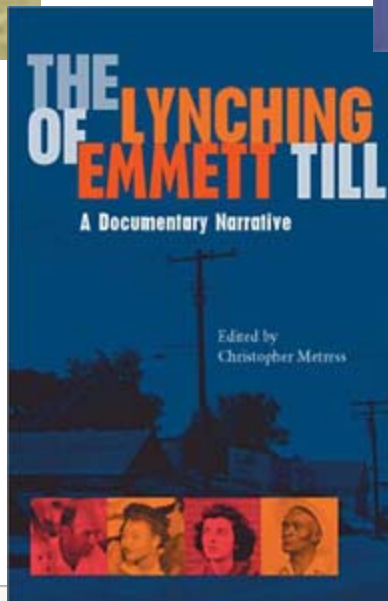
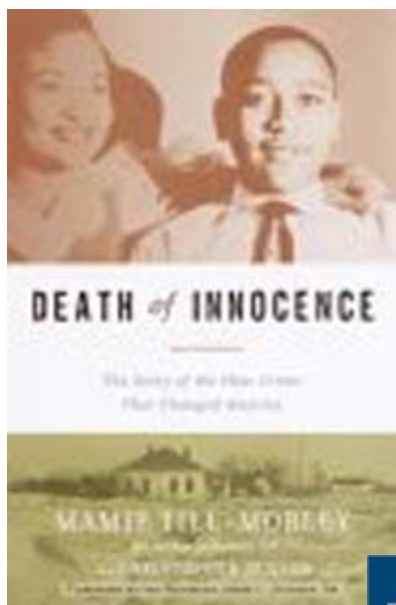
*Its location as a site of a significant historic event which may or may not have taken place within or involved the use of any existing improvements.*

- The funeral and extended visitation for Emmett Till, held from November 3 to 6, 1955, at the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ, was a pivotal event in the history of the civil-rights movement.
- Emmett Till’s badly-mutilated body, seen in person by thousands of mourners during the funeral and visitation, and by millions more captured in a famous and graphic photograph published in *Jet* magazine, shocked and angered those who saw it and served as a catalyst for political and social change in America.

### ***Criterion 3: Significant Person***

*Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

- Emmett Till is a nationally-significant person associated with the civil-rights movement in the United States. The Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ Building, as the location of his funeral and extended visitation following his lynching in 1955, is one of the most significant surviving Chicago buildings associated with him.

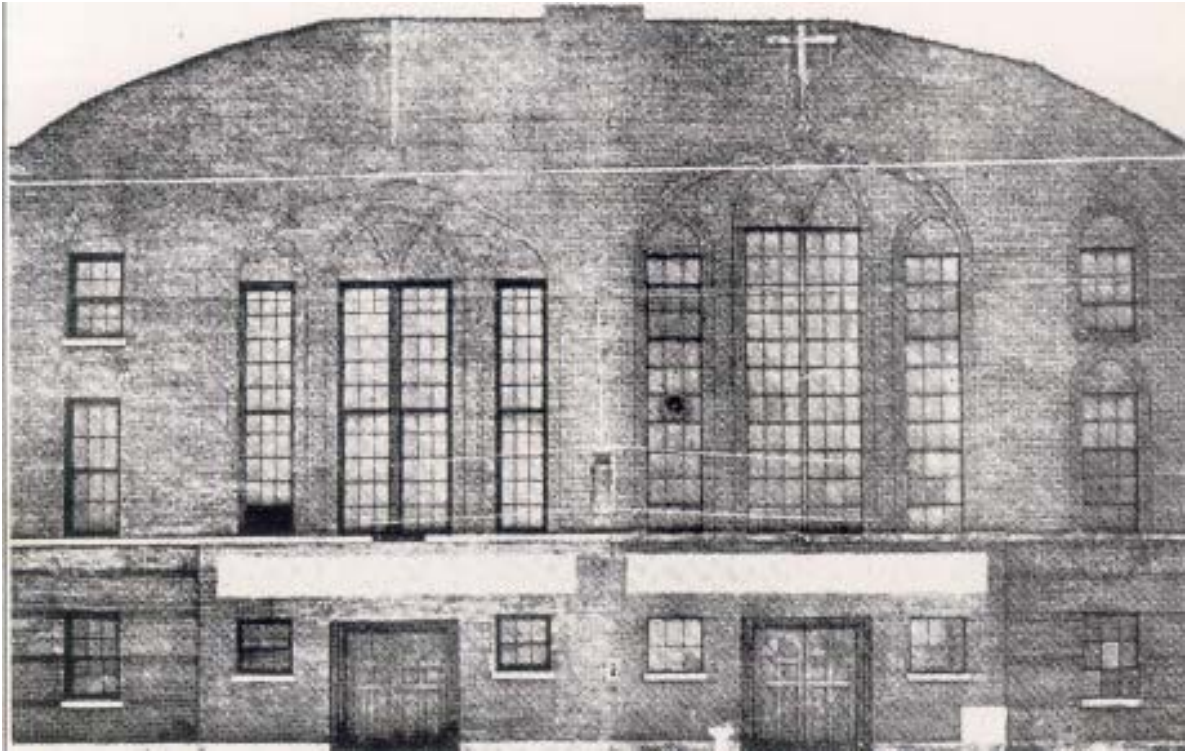


Covers of several of the many books and documentaries on Emmett Till's lynching.





Exterior and interior photographs of the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ Building during the Emmett Till funeral, a galvanizing event in the civil-rights movement in the United States.



Top: A historic view of the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ Building much as it appeared in 1955 (photographs of the Emmett Till show signage in the blank area above the doors). Bottom: A photograph of the building taken October 2005. The front facade of the building was refronted with new tan brick in 1992-93 and earlier window sash was replaced with glass block.





Views of the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ Building as of October 2005. Although the front facade of the building was covered with new brick in 1992-93, the historic red brick of the front facade remains behind it. The original massing, roof form, and other elevations all remain.





Photographs of the church building's upper-floor sanctuary taken in October 2005. The sanctuary retains its historic spatial volume, but was remodeled in 1992-93.

- Mamie Till Bradley (later known as Mamie Till-Mobley), the mother of Emmett Till, is a nationally-significant person associated with the civil-rights movement in the United States through her efforts to educate Americans about the need for equal political and social rights for African-Americans. The Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ, as the location of her son's funeral, is the most significant surviving Chicago building associated with her.

### ***Integrity Criteria***

*The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.*

The Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ Building has been changed a number of times since the construction of the original one-story brick building in 1922. It was expanded to two stories in 1927 and enlarged, when its main sanctuary was built. In 1944, the building was further remodeled, while a rear addition was added in 1951. It was this configuration and appearance of the building at the time of the Emmett Till funeral.

The building's current appearance dates to 1992-93, when the existing front façade was refronted with tan brick, and existing windows were replaced with glass block. In addition, the sanctuary interior was remodeled. The overall massing, side elevations, and roofline of the building, however, remain intact.

Despite these changes, the building retains its location, overall design, and historic associations with the Emmett Till funeral. It remains the location of an event of national importance to the civil-rights movement and the most important surviving building in Chicago associated with Emmett Till and his death. In addition, the front façade from 1955 remains in place behind the 1992-93 refront and possibly could be restored.

### **SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES**

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered the most important to preserve the historic and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its evaluation of the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ Building, the Commission recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building.

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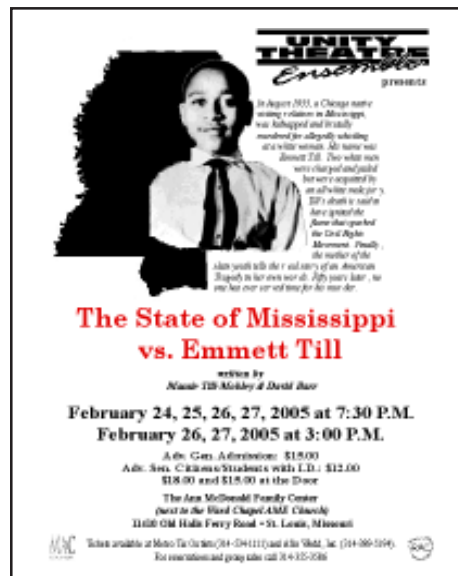
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The lynching of Emmett Till has inspired numerous literary efforts, including poems by (left) Gwendolyn Brooks; (middle) a play written by Mamie Till Mobley and David Barr; and a song by (right) Bob Dylan. Bottom: Emmett Till's gravestone in Burr Oak Cemetery.



## **Acknowledgements**

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### **Illustrations**

From “Lynched! Chicago’s E. L. Till,” *The American Negro*: p. 2 (top).

Various internet sites (site URLs available in research notebook): pp. 5, 22 (top right & middle left), 25, and 31 (top middle, top right, & bottom).

From Halberstam, *The Fifties*: p. 6 (top).

From Crowe, *Getting Away with Murder*: pp. 6 (bottom), 8 (top left & bottom), 9 (top right & bottom), 11, 14 (bottom), 19, 20, and 22 (middle right).

From Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*: pp. 8 (top right), 9 (top left), 14 (top), 15, and 17 (bottom).

*Jet* magazine, September 15, 1955: p. 11.

Courtesy Rev. Cleven Wardlow, Jr., and Bishop Cody V. Marshall: pp. 13 and 27 (top).

*Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 2005: p. 16.

*Chicago Sun-Times*, May 20, 2004: p. 17 (top).

From Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till*, p. 22 (top left), and 26 (top).

*Chicago Tribune*, June 5, 2005: p. 22 (bottom)

*Chicago Tribune*, n.d.: p. 26 (top).

Department of Planning and Development, Landmarks Division: pp. 27 (bottom), 28, and 29.

From Kenan Heise, *Chaos, Creativity, and Culture*: p. 31 (top left).



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